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By Charles W. Hayford

Joan Hinton died last month in a Beijing hospital at the age of 88. It was surprising that so many mainstream American newspapers ran detailed obituaries. Hinton had lived in China since 1948, mostly running dairy farms, and she didn't go out of her way to address Americans, as did her brother, William, author of the classic *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (1967). She did publicly attack American imperialism — in 2006, she displayed a T shirt reading "F—k Bush" in Chinese.

The obits play up these contrasts, though not the anti-imperialism: this piece by William Grimes is titled "Physicist Who Chose China over Atom Bomb Is Dead at 88" (*NY Times,* June 11), while Valerie J. Nelson's sympathetic obit is headlined"physicist joined Maoist revolution after helping develop the atom bomb" (*LA Times,* June 21). In the anti-Communist hysteria of early 1950s America, Hinton was labeled "The Atom Spy Who Got Away." The death notice written from China finally mentions her actual occupation: "atomic scientist turned dairy farmer"(China.org; June 21), while the National Democratic Front of the Philippines called her "Comrade Joan Hinton, proletarian revolutionary heroine."

The Wikipedia article about Hinton features quotes and references, including to a biography published in the Philippines, *Silage Choppers & Snake Spirits,* by Chou Dao-yuan.

The story here is of a progressive physicist attracted by Maoist ideals. Her mother, Carmelita, learned social work with Jane Addams at Hull House in Chicago (where Joan and Bill were born), then founded the Putney School in Vermont based on John Dewey's theories of work and learning. Joan got hooked on skiing and physics, went to Bennington College, then did MA work at University of Wisconsin. She was denied access to the PhD program because she was a woman, but Enrico Fermi, "father of the atomic bomb," welcomed her into his inner circle at Los Alamos. She was shocked to learn that tens of thousands of Japanese were killed by the bomb which she had helped to make. She didn't want to spend her life figuring out how to kill people, Hinton said, so she went to China to help them. There she married Sid Engst, a Cornell-trained specialist in breeding cows, and settled into pastoral obscurity outside Xi'an, where their two sons and a daughter learned only Chinese.

She never gave up her American citizenship or joined Chinese atom research, and used her physics only to design automated milking and continuous-flow pasteurizing machines. Not until she and Sid were summoned to Beijing as interpreters during the Cultural Revolution did they get involved in national politics. Living at an elite hotel did not seem right, so they publicly demanded that foreign experts and their children should share the hardships of the masses. Chairman Mao granted their wish.

Hinton told Seth Faison of the *New York Times* in 1996 that "Mao started the Cultural Revolution to cure the disparity between the few and the many" and asked "How could that be wrong?" She dismissed as revisionist history the charges that Mao's policies led to the deaths of millions following the Great Leap Forward. "We were in the countryside then, and there was malnutrition, not starvation," she said. "Without socialism, we would have starved. We banded together, sharing grain coupons." The reform policies after Mao's death in 1976 had nothing to do with revolution, she said, and led to consumerism and class division.

In 2002, Rob Gifford of National Public Radio asked Hinton if she regretted either the hard times during the Cultural Revolution or the disappointment of the post-Mao reforms. No, she replied, with an incredulous, almost querulous laugh — she had taken part in the two greatest events of the 20th century, the invention of the atomic bomb and the Chinese Revolution. "Who could ask for anything more than that?"

These stories allowed us to see her as a curiosity, a feisty Rip Van Winkle who gave a juicy interview, with little mention of Mao's actual politics.

Jonathan Mirsky would have none of this. Following Hinton's death, his *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece was titled "Deifying Chairman Mao: Joan Hinton, atomic physicist and Hundred Percenter, idolized Chairman Mao and his actions until her death." (June 21; subscription required). Mirsky groups her with other "deifiers": Edgar Snow, who wrote *Red Star Over China* (1937) as a "message from Mao" and denied the famine reports when he returned in the late 1950s; John Service, a Foreign Service officer dispatched to Yan'an in 1944 (the *WSJ* says "1948," surely a typo); and Sidney Rittenberg, one of the few foreigners admitted to the party. Mirsky asked: "What kept them from recanting?"

> … the Hundred Percenters—or are they Three Hundred Percenters, as some have styled them?—were truly stranded in the often surreal Maoist world-view. They had to approve or excuse horrendous acts. That often inspired a fierce courage among the "foreign friends," since they were Maoists by choice rather than birth. …

To look deeply within one's self, to consider the tortures and deaths one had condoned could be shattering.

He also states that Hinton condemned her children when they came to the States and learned English, though she told a reporter that they would have stayed in China if the bourgeois rightists had not abandoned the egalitarian policies of the Maoist era.

Mirsky is right not to condescend to Hinton as a figure of nostalgia, a quaint and blameless fellow traveler, or victim of McCarthyism. Yet his no-nonsense stance also turns her life into a minatory, almost bullying fable, not the messy life of an individual. Mirsky lumps her with quite different people. Snow met Mao first as an anti-Japanese nationalist hero and never adjusted; Service was never a Hundred Percenter, not even a red-hot Maoist; and Rittenberg did finally re-think things, though only after the Great Helmsman was safely dead.

It strikes me that Hinton took on a hard farm life in much the same spirit as the protestant missionaries of earlier years. While she did not come "to change China," in Jonathan Spence's now obligatory phrase, she did want to find a pure and meaningful new life far from home. She was righteous and judgmental, but it was no small thing to build an industrial dairy farm in a country where milk had long been regarded with suspicion. (As a final irony, she told one reporter that she stayed on the farm only to prevent local officials from taking the land for a housing development.)

All I know is what I read in the papers. Those who know more may want to weigh in.

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Photo from china.org

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